



Temple Rodef Shalom

This One Time At Band Camp...
*A Sermonette Delivered at the
Erev Rosh Hashanah Older Family Service*

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Shana Tova! Here we are gathered together again at the start of another New Year. Everyone looks so great, rested, some of you tanned. I hope from a summer of wonderful memories and relaxing days at the beach or overseas, on exotic vacations. I know Rabbi Saxe went to Alaska this summer. Rabbi Schwartzman went to Israel. Cantor Scher went to Nova Scotia. I went to band camp.

So, this one time at band camp... (I've always wanted to say that!) No, I'm not in the band. My wife and I were chaperones for McLean High School's marching band camp, in which my son, Jake, plays saxophone.

There are about 120 kids in the Marching Band, from brand spanking new 9th graders, to experienced 12th graders. All of them loaded on 3 buses with their instruments from trombone to saxophone, from mellophone to sousaphone. From tuba to timpani. All headed north to a Quaker boarding school in Westtown, PA for 6 long days of marching and playing in the heat.

I have to tell you how impressed I was with these kids. Every day they got up at 6 in the morning, and by 7 they were on the field marching, besides meals and some free time in the afternoon, they didn't finish their day until the evening band practice was over around 9:00 at night.

And it was hot and humid that week. We went through over 650 gallons of water and Gatorade, which I helped stir... more than 35 bottles of sunscreen and some 20 cans of bee spray. Yes, the bees were in full force, especially around the sugary gatorade.

But it was really fun watching these kids march. Marching requires great memory, focus and precision. The music is loud; kids are trying to focus on the notes, and at the same time, where to walk. Can you imagine what would happen if one of them forgot where they were going next? I could see it now, as the trumpets are marching one way, and the tubas the other, one person who forgets their next step can get bonked in the head with a tuba. That would hurt.

Marching is also about being involved in a team... in a group effort to create an extraordinary production that's both visually and musically exciting. It's about creating something bigger and better than yourself. When one person marches around on a field and plays his or her instrument while moving about, people might be interested for a moment and then maybe think, "what's that guy doing out there?" But 120 people, marching together, zig-zaging each other and forming shapes and circles, while at the same time performing a spectacular piece of music is an extraordinary, eye-popping, communal event.

As a marcher, you are a part of a truly meaningful group effort, where just you can make a significant difference, especially if you don't mess up, otherwise you might just get bonked in the head with that tuba.

But marching is also about learning individual skills necessary to succeed. It's about knowing what you are supposed to do, from going to the right place in your routine, to playing the right notes at the same time. Marching can improve your confidence in yourself, build your identity and help strengthen you: emotionally, physically and even spiritually.

So, you're probably wondering now, why I'm telling you about my week at band camp?

As I was watching the marchers, I was thinking about being Jewish. I know that's a little strange. But, I'm looking at the zig-zaging and twirling and moving forward and backwards and sideways and diagonalways, and I'm thinking about how everyone has to do their part in making the show come to life, and what it might be like if that trombone player pushes his slide too far out, just as the mellophone player crossed his path...one mis-step and who knows what could happen!... and that made me think of being Jewish.

Yes, that's right. Here I am on a hot August day in the middle of a field of marchers, chaperones, staff and bees, thinking about religion.

And what I came up with is, that Religion is like being in a marching band. I know this sounds odd, but think about it. In marching band, you're trying to keep in step. In Judaism, we call that "following commandments," or being responsible. Religion, and in this case, being Jewish, is about figuring out where we have to do next, while doing all sorts of things at the same time, and not bonking into that tuba.

Religion is about knowing what you are supposed to do in life, how to act, how to treat people, how to make decisions. Marching band is about being a part of a big team, what we in Judaism call "community." About being a part of something much bigger than yourself, and understanding your role. You see, I was thinking about this because I was thinking about those people, many of them young people, who are saying, "Why do we need to go to Temple? Why should I care about being Jewish?"

Seeing the marchers made me realize that maybe we can help understand the importance of being Jewish, by comparing it to the marching band. It's understanding our role, our place in life, by knowing where to step, just like the marchers learn, and thereby, fulfilling our mission - our mission as a Jew. And when we do it well, it is truly a great feeling and

gives us great meaning in our lives.

So what is our role? Let me put it in marching band terms for you. First it means playing the correct notes, or in Judaism, performing special jobs: called traditions, rituals and mitzvot;

Being Jewish links all of us to traditions, history and values that have been going on for thousands of years. When we understand that by performing these traditions, we are helping to continue Judaism, just as the people before us have done, we are building our identity, and finding our place in life. In this way, we're not alone in history; we're connected to each other by a timeless link from one generation to the next.

Ritual also means doing something on a regular basis that reminds us, on a regular basis, that we are Jewish, that we are part of this special community. Lighting candles on Shabbat is a great example. Knowing that your mom, grandmother, great-grandmother and on and on probably did this same ritual and spoke the same words every Friday night is truly meaningful, as well as knowing that Jews all over the world are doing the same thing at the same time.

This leads right into my second point: knowing what your next step is. When we move in the right direction, or end up in the right place in the marching formation, we feel really great about our accomplishments. In Judaism when we do this, we are filled with great meaning in our lives, and feel like we've done something holy. Knowing that you are moving in the right direction, in Judaism, means making good choices and decisions, or acting like a mensch.

And when we combine that with traditions or rituals such as lighting the candles, singing a blessing, thanking God for something, helping a person in need, doing a good deed, offering a prayer to someone who is sick, we elevate our life from the ordinary to the extraordinary; from the mundane, to the sacred. In other words, we are doing something holy.

In Hebrew, the word for holiness is Kedushah, which also means separateness. When we do something holy, we separate ourselves from that which is ordinary and everyday, to that which is special, different, and elevating. That adds special meaning to what we do.

Everyone has a need for meaning. We want to make a difference and feel good about who we are and what we do. Some people find meaning through their accomplishments at work or school. Getting a good grade on something you worked hard on, gives you lots of meaning. We want that. We need that. Knowing who you are, and what your purpose is in life, can give you these feelings too.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, a modern Jewish scholar, says "Judaism can save your life from being wasted, from being spent on the trivial. Judaism is a way of making sure that you don't spend your whole life, with its potential for holiness, on eating, sleeping, and paying your bills." I'm going to add to this watching TV or playing video games. Rabbi Kushner says, "Judaism is a guide to investing your life in things that really matter, so that your life will

matter. Singing in the choir, playing in the Temple band, going to Torah study, are all examples of this. Judaism can teach you how to transform pleasure into joy and celebration, and how to feel like an extension of God by doing what God does, taking the ordinary and making it holy.

Another prominent Jew, Senator Joseph Lieberman understands holiness. Remember him, Shir Harmony, he was on stage with many of you, when you sang in 2008 for Israel's 60th anniversary celebration in Washington. Senator Lieberman said, "...being Jewish means having help in answering life's most fundamental questions, such as, 'How did I come to this place?' and 'Now that I am here, how should I live.' Whether you agree with his politics or not, Senator Lieberman is a man of great faith, who sees his Judaism as an anchor in his life. He says his "faith begins with a joyful gratitude that there is a God who created the universe and then ... gave us laws and values in order to improve our lives."

Being holy means staying in time with the beat, making good decisions based on your good values, caring about others and turning things that are ordinary into things that are extraordinary.

Some people say that doing acts of Tzedakah, such as feeding the poor, helping the homeless, visiting the elderly, caring for the sick, allow them to feel God's holy presence in their life at that very moment that they are helping another person. It's as if they are God's messengers, taking over where God left off creating the world.

So if you want to know what it feels like to be holy, to have God in your life, try doing something really great for someone in need. Make their day, make them smile. Then you may feel God's presence, and you may feel just as great as when you played the notes perfectly on your clarinet in the marching band and moved exactly where you were supposed to go.

Thirdly, in marching band, we realize we are a part of something bigger than ourselves. In our Jewish world, we are a part of a larger Jewish community, it's bigger than just me or you, and we're tied from one generation to the next.

Judaism is not just the religion of Cantor Shochet or Rabbi Saxe, we are a team of Jews where each one of us is an important contributor to the whole. Whether we are male or female, young or old, American, British, Middle Eastern or Russian, we all are part of the same community of Jews. We are a community of shared practices, values and traditions. And because we are all linked together, our Jewish world is a smaller place. It gives a sense of belonging, and reminds us that there are people just like us all over the world, who sing the same songs, say the same blessings, read the same words in the Torah. And being part of the team, helps the team succeed. Judaism is still around after almost 6,000 years because people like you and me did our part to keep it going.

Finally, when we do our part in the band, and the show goes off without a hitch, we know that our little part helped make the show great. In Judaism, when we perform an act of Tzedakah and know we've helped someone or something, we are making the world great, or

Tikkun Olam: repairing the world.

Being Jewish means believing that you can and must make the world great. When we see something wrong, we act to fix it. When we see that someone is being taken advantage of, we act to stop it. When we lend a helping hand, perform an act of Tzedakah, do something for another person or for our world, we are all taking part in Tikkun Olam, making the world greater than it is. This is part of knowing what our role is in life. And yes, in the marching band we have to do our part to make the show great. We have a responsibility to the rest of the band and the audience, as well as the conductor, just like we have a responsibility as a Jew to make our world great through Tikkun Olam.

So, perhaps all of you should understand that being Jewish is like playing an instrument in God's marching band. This allows us to understand our role in life as Jews. We are: 1) following traditions that have been handed down to us for centuries; 2) making good choices because our Jewish value system teaches us about being a mensch, which makes us holy; 3) understanding our identity as part of this big family we call the Jewish people, where belonging and sharing a common heritage and culture makes us unique and connects us to others all over the world; and finally, 4) we are making great music, in other words: being good team members, playing the right notes, or, helping people, pursuing justice and Tzedakah, and making the world a better place.

So, when someone asks you what did Cantor Shochet speak about this New Year? You can say, "this one time at band camp, he discovered how great it is to be part of God's marching band."

On this Rosh Hashanah, a time to reflect about our Judaism and the year yet to come, let us all be instruments in God's marching band. Let us all stay in time with our Jewish beat, playing a holy symphony and moving forward in our Jewish journeys. Just try not to get bonked in the head by the tuba!

Shana Tova!